



Carol Ross: Bridge Builder

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The leaders of the future are people who can bridge paradigms. They are analytical and also intuitive. They understand and appreciate technology and also are highly skilled in motivating people. They are successful in the dominant culture but also understand what it feels like to be an outsider.

It used to be that the successful business leader was someone who specialized in a particular job, function, or skill. That was when life was simpler and more predictable. You were rewarded for learning more and more about your field and becoming narrower and more expert at one thing. But the fast-pace and complexity of the changing business landscape has made the specialist obsolete.

The leaders of the future are people I call “Edgewalkers.” They have the capacity to walk between different worlds and to integrate seemingly opposing paradigms. Carol Ross is one such Edgewalker.

All through school, Carol was very good at math and sciences. She received her Bachelor’s Degree in Chemical Engineering at Northwestern and worked for 3 years in a nuclear power plant. This was her first experience in bridging paradigms, and it came

from being a woman in a masculine field that was not particularly welcoming to women. It was extremely difficult, and as soon as circumstances allowed, she left to go back to school, and earned her Masters Degree in Operations Research.

Her next several jobs were in the telecommunications field and she finally ended up as an engineer at Avaya (formerly Lucent). She was in a group that was as concerned about how they worked together as they were about getting the work done. Teamwork and relationships really mattered, and Carol found that she really thrived in this environment. She says, “Some of my passion started to blossom.”

She took a course on Dialogue and she found herself experiencing a whole new way of thinking and being. “I started learning the wisdom in using my feeling side,” Carol reports. “I learned that everyone has some cross to bear that you can’t see. It taught me compassion. Now when I see anyone I ask, ‘What’s the cross that this person has to bear that I can’t see?’”

It became a time of personal transformation and seeking for Carol as she began to cross the bridge between the analytical/technical world and the feeling/intuitive world. Her personal transformation became organizational transformation as Carol felt the need to express her new awareness at work. Avaya is a global telecommunications firm with over 18,000 employees and revenues of \$5 billion. They sell communications equipment to 90% of the Fortune 500. Carol was working in the R&D division of 1000 engineers, a group she describes as “logical, rational, left-brain thinkers.”

She saw her role as “an organizational gardener – creating the right conditions to bring out the best in people, a cultural catalyst – forever looking at ways to honor our own humanity in a culture used to honoring technical know-how, and a ‘go-to’ person to

help with the ‘soft-stuff’ – applying my analytical background to find just the right tool for people problems.” She no longer could identify herself as an engineer.

Avaya was losing some of its most talented people to other organizations, and Carol recognized that this was a “soft-stuff” kind of problem. She proposed a retention program and became the leader of this initiative. She knew that part of the problem was that the environment could be even more nurturing to the human spirit, so she began doing some very simple things to change this.

Her first step was to bring flowers into meetings that she was leading. Then she began to bring flowers to other peoples’ meetings. She noticed that the beauty and the scent of the flowers seemed to shift the energy in the room and to make meetings more productive and rewarding. Sometimes she even brought in candles and music to create a more welcoming environment.

After coming back from a conference called “Come to the Edge,” Carol was inspired to share her insights with colleagues and began a series of brown bag lunches on spirituality in the workplace. She also arranged for lunchtime speakers on finding meaningful work. She brought in a yoga instructor to teach people the calming, restorative effect of deep breathing, and even started a presentation at a VP’s staff meeting with a request for a few deep breaths. Other people began to do the same thing in their meetings.

What makes Carol willing to take these kinds of risks and to go out on the edge in a way that is successful and transforming? I suspect that one of the reasons is that Carol grew up on the edge of two worlds. Her parents are from China and she grew up in the mid-west. Her parents are practicing Buddhists, but she grew up in a predominantly

Christian culture. All her life she has lived in two different worlds and has had to bridge the differences.

It's not easy living in different worlds at the same time. Edgewalkers need to find ways to nourish themselves so that they can feel centered. To do this Carol adds things into her life, little by little, that bring her joy. This includes gardening, flower arranging, playing in a community concert band, and long bike rides with a friend. She also added in spiritual practices one by one, including hikes by herself on Sunday mornings, yoga, journaling, and watching for synchronicities.

In December 2002, Avaya had a major layoff, and Carol lost her job. Even though she loved what she was doing, she sees this as a real opportunity to bring her bridging skills to a wider audience. She is now taking classes to deepen her intuitive skills. She knows that these skills will come in handy in the new business she is creating: an organizational transformation program based on what she learned from her experiences at Avaya.

When asked, "What's next?" Carol responds, "I see being able to connect with a wider range and richer scope of people. I lead a magical life. The Universe just comes out and supports you. I want to share my gifts even more. Now I can hit the sweet spot by connecting with organizations that say 'Yes.'"